

Congestion pricing? Sure. But steer clear of those \$40 Lexus lanes

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Editorial Board



To call what happened to suburban D.C. motorists earlier this month “sticker shock” would be a hefty understatement. On the opening day of new express toll lanes on Interstate 66, motorists drove a downtown-bound, 10-mile stretch during their morning rush hour commute and learned it would cost them \$34.50. The next morning, the same toll lane stretch cost them \$40.

“This is like a bad telethon,” tweeted commuter Cameron Gray, according to the Washington Post, “watching the numbers go higher and higher all morning.”

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This sounds a cautionary note about the Illinois Department of Transportation’s proposal to create express toll lanes on the Stevenson Expressway. Last year, IDOT proposed adding one express toll lane in each direction on I-55 between I-355 and I-90/94. Now it proposes two express toll lanes in each direction between I-294 and I-90/94, and one express toll lane in each direction from I-294 and I-355.

Car poolers and Pace buses would have free access to the lanes. Developers would pay for all or part of the construction through a public-private partnership, the Tribune’s Mary Wisniewski reports.

A lot has to happen before the plan becomes reality. The Illinois General Assembly still has to

sign off on the idea. If and when that happens, IDOT could start looking for contractors by 2019. That means there's ample time to scrutinize. That's good.

IDOT says it hasn't made up its mind whether to charge a flat toll rate for cars using the I-55 express lanes, or go the Virginia way, known as "dynamic pricing." Dynamic pricing is a variation on congestion pricing, under which drivers pay a premium to travel in lanes that move faster. Those tolls can be higher during rush hour or other heavy traffic periods.

Under Virginia's dynamic model, the tolls fluctuate with demand, changing every six minutes. As traffic in the express toll lanes increases, tolls go up. The goal is to maintain an average speed of 45 mph in those lanes. Higher tolls manage congestion by dissuading some drivers from heading into the express lanes. With the drop in traffic, 45 mph or more is reached.

Proponents of the Virginia system say it encourages motorists to carpool, use mass transit or pick alternate routes. And if a commuter is willing to pay a premium to get to work faster, that's their choice.

But that system prices out people who can't afford \$40 to drive a 10-mile stretch of pavement. It creates what detractors call "Lexus lanes."

We support the concept of congestion pricing, but not without limits. Charging a premium gives solo drivers the option of moving faster in the express lanes or staying in the free lanes. A fluctuating premium rate has some appeal — it assures that the express lanes don't become so crowded as to defeat their purpose. But transportation officials should think long and hard before implementing a pricing system that allows the price of a commute to spike to \$40 or higher.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is collaborating with the Illinois Tollway and IDOT to solve congestion on more than a dozen stretches of expressway suffering from gridlock — including segments of the Kennedy, Eisenhower and Dan Ryan, along with Interstate 80 in the south suburbs. One solution the agencies are considering is congestion pricing.

We hope the Virginia experience informs their planning. Congestion pricing has the potential to ease gridlock dramatically. But a \$40 commute? Let's not go down that road.

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